

Multilingualism and Democracy

Khethiwe Marais, The Sunday Independent, Johannesburg, 16 March 2014

As with all aspects of South African society, language policy required transformation into a new democratic dispensation within the context of multi-lingualism. The only official languages were Afrikaans and English and this had to be changed.

In response to a new constitution (that recognised all the indigenous languages of South Africa in addition to English and Afrikaans) and language activists' expectations, the then-minister of arts, culture, science and technology Dr Ben Ngubane established a language task group in 1995 for the task of new language planning and policy formulation for the post-apartheid dispensation.

The work of this task group culminated in the new Language Plan and the National Language Policy Framework. The aim of this was to usher in an implementation of a policy and practice of multilingualism in all spheres of government and to inspire the private sector to follow suit.

The sociolinguistic scholar and language activist Neville Alexander argued that "implementing a consistently democratic language policy is critical to the consolidation and expansion of the democratic society" in South Africa.

An inclusive language approach enables people to hear and to be heard and to effectively participate in every domain of society, be it education, media or politics.

Linguist Ayo Bamgbose argues that language can and does empower or disempower people. This is attested to by the fact that in almost all jobs in South Africa, be it in government or the private sector, the people who get high-powered positions are invariably proficient in English, or claim to be or aspire to be proficient in English.

The adverts, applications and interviews for these positions are in English, regardless of the constituencies or communities that will be served by the people in such positions.

Once people are employed in those positions, communication, the production processes, training and performance appraisals all take place in English.

This means that those who are not proficient in English do not stand a chance of accessing information or good jobs and positions in the government service and the private sector.

Since the adoption of the National Language Policy Framework, the principle and policy of multi-lingualism have been accepted on paper, but have not been put into practice.

There has been no meaningful implementation of this multilingual policy by the government in general and by the Department of Arts and Culture in particular, which has the language mandate.

While there are 11 official languages in South Africa, English gets to be exclusively used over all other 10 languages in the public and private sectors for all official transactions and communication and in all spheres.

The government has jettisoned the official policy of multilingualism in favour of English monolingualism and hegemony in spite of the negative impact this has on South African society.

The negative impact of English monolingualism is glaringly and intensely manifest in education. Research here and internationally has continuously proved that education is well-served and better understood through teaching and learning in the mother tongue.

In this country as the language medium in schools continues to be exclusively English it contributes a lot to high drop-out rates, a high percentage of those repeating classes and a high failure rate, especially in matric, for non-English speakers.

International assessments of our school pupils place them among the lowest in the world for numeracy and literacy skills, in spite of the huge budget allocated to education. Even among those who pass matric and pursue studies at tertiary level, learning conceptualisation, literacy and numeracy levels are poor.

Universities are at pains to point this out and that it is a factor contributing to poor pass rates among students. Regardless of these poor results, parents continue to insist that their children be taught exclusively in English.

The authorities have a flexible language approach in education policy that allows parents to make choices about languages of learning and teaching in schools.

While this is a commendable policy, it is unfair of education authorities to expect parents to make informed choices about multilingual education.

Most poor parents decide on English only as they want themselves and their children to acquire competency and skills in English so they may access better opportunities in an English-oriented society.

Parents make this choice even though it is an uphill battle for most pupils, who are indigenous language speakers and not immersed in English language and culture.

Among the elites of society, government and business, English is considered an asset as it is associated with economic benefits.

The attitude of government and business towards English hegemony is aided and abetted by cultural and economic imperialism as well as globalisation of the West.

The status of English as the language of power was inherited from the colonial legacy, which continues to exert a negative influence on local languages and local solutions.

The ruling elite groups in South Africa, as elsewhere in Africa, have not fully decolonised their minds. All language policy choices made since colonialism have been in favour of the colonial languages and marginalisation of the indigenous languages.

According to Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the elite continue to accept the "fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English".

Decision-makers in government and the elite persist in the logic that English is the language of business and an international language. How it came to occupy this position and continues to do so is never asked. It is assumed that this is the inherent position and destiny of English. What has become a reality is that English monolingualism has become a basis for distinction among social groups and classes.

English has come to determine who has access to political power and economic resources. It has become a powerful tool for exclusion and exploitation in public and private sectors.

Linguistics professor Victor Webb raises the argument of language being "a barrier to meaningful social, political and economic transformation and reconstruction" in the country. He argues that the language barrier contributes to disadvantaging citizens in accessing their rights and privileges as they cannot effectively participate in political life and social advancement programmes.

Webb also contends that in the economy, people's chances of advancement at work are negatively affected if they do not share the same language as the managers. In communities the people's chances of securing government tenders are minimal if they do not understand the language of tender documents.

At local level most communities are excluded from economic development processes and projects as they are not proficient in the language used in documents and in communication on such projects.

People cannot engage and influence decisions meaningfully in political discourses that affect their lives if they do not have sufficient fluency and proficiency in the language of political debates.

Webb concludes that "language can be a gatekeeper; a discriminator which facilitates participation and sharing or acts as a barrier to accessing opportunities... and this is what has happened in South Africa".

One might argue that if communities involved in service delivery protests had been engaged in their own languages in discussions about local economic development they would have influenced discussions in favour of their areas or would have had a better understanding of the immensity, complexity and intricacies involved in budgeting and planning for development.

While this may or may not have been the case here, one needs to caution that although language plays a significant role, it is not the only gatekeeper or discriminator in the inequality ratio. There are many other factors in South African society today that lead to exclusion, inequality and injustice including race, class, gender, nepotism and cronyism, all of which advantage some and disadvantage others.

Multilingualism policy is not only good for participatory democracy and education but – if consistently and carefully developed through research and development, human language technology, orthographic development of the indigenous languages, translation, interpretation, language learning and teaching, materials development, publishing and printing – it can build a big language industry and create jobs. Supported multilingualism in Europe contributes to billions of dollars and euros.

The African renaissance for the potential growth of Africa must begin with the development of African languages. Lessons need to be learnt on how the European renaissance and its development were inextricably linked to the development of European languages.

- *Marais is a linguist based at UNISA Language Services.*

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